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September 26, 2009

MUSIC REVIEW | 'KRISTINA'

Swedes Coming to America, Grandly

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

If the moribund music-theater genre facetiously nicknamed poperetta has any chance of a resurgence on Broadway, it could come somewhere down the road from an American production of the bombastic Swedish epic “Kristina.”

The show, which had two lavish concert performances at [Carnegie Hall](#) on Wednesday and Thursday evenings, was created by Benny Andersson (music) and Bjorn Ulvaeus (lyrics), those box office champs who gave us “Mamma Mia!” (and before that “Chess”) and whose first-name initials provide the two B’s in [ABBA](#). Herbert Kretzmer, a songwriter best known for his English lyrics for [Charles Aznavour](#) standards, collaborated with Mr. Ulvaeus on the flowery translations.

A mammoth hit in Sweden, where it opened in 1995 and ran for four years, “Kristina” is adapted from “The Emigrants,” Vilhelm Moberg’s novel about a group of Swedes, who, escaping multiple hardships, immigrate to America in the middle of the 19th century and settle in the Minnesota Territory. The closest comparison to a Broadway forerunner would be to “Les Misérables,” another musical pageant with epic pretensions, although the score of “Kristina” is more substantial.

At the second Carnegie Hall show, the creators were splendidly served by the assembled forces, which included a cast of 27 and the 50-piece American Theater Orchestra, conducted by Paul Gemignani. The ensemble delivered a well-balanced, finely detailed symphonic sound.

The story was illustrated by black-and-white slides over which florid historical commentary, resembling the titles in the movie “Gone With the Wind,” was scrolled. Louise Pitre (from “Mamma Mia!”), playing Ulrika, a village prostitute who begins a new life in America, filled in as occasional narrator.

The lead singers, Helen Sjöholm, who played the title character in the original Swedish production, and Russell Watson, portrayed the show’s central married couple, Kristina and Karl Oskar, who undertake the harrowing three-month voyage to the New World along with children and other residents of their village. Both have first-rate poperetta voices, with Mr. Watson’s Puccini-ready tenor the more operatic. Each brings down the house at least once.

While more expansive than his other scores, Mr. Andersson’s music remains solidly in pop territory. His signature melodic style, as always, is martial and declarative, heavy on staccato diction and virtually devoid of syncopation. There are nods to everything from the film scores of Hollywood westerns to Gilbert and Sullivan.

Near the end of the first act, when the emigrants arrive in the New World, and throughout the second, the score

becomes deliberately more American in flavor. A second-act highlight, “Gold Can Turn to Sand,” sung by Karl Oskar’s brother Robert (Kevin Odekirk), a dreamer who succumbs to gold rush fever and returns from California with yellow fever, is a robust quasioperatic cowboy song.

As with “Mamma Mia!” and “Chess,” melody rules. And as evidenced by the pandemonium kicked up by “Gold Can Turn to Sand” and “You Have to Be There,” Kristina’s anguished plea to heaven after miscarrying, “Kristina” has more than its share of showstoppers.

Humor is not its strong suit. There is a clunky attempt at wit in “Lice,” sung during a shipboard infestation scare, whose lyrics describe how pieces of gravel flung by an angry God turned into the first lice. In “American Man” four women upon meeting an unmarried American preacher exult:

“Who’d have thought such men existed?

Does the housework unassisted

Sweeps the floor and does the dishes

And his coffee is delicious.”

As the success of ABBA has demonstrated, audiences don’t find a lack of lyrical ingenuity or idiomatic understanding of English a problem, as long as the words make sense, and the tunes are insistent enough. And in “Kristina” one large, easy-to-digest melody follows another in a musical arc that steadily intensifies. The show leaves audiences feeling something important has been said, even if it hasn’t.

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